

Why Neue Ventura Will Not Be Reopening Large Gatherings On May 31

May 2020

Romans 12v9–21

[9] Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. [10] Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. [11] Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. [12] Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. [13] Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. [14] Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. [15] Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. [16] Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. [17] Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. [18] If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. [19] Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” [20] To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” [21] Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (ESV)

Philippians 2v3–8

[3] Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. [4] Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. [5] Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, [6] who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, [7] but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. [8] And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (ESV)

Background

As you may have heard, many California churches are planning to defy the state (and county) guidance for large group gatherings (including religious gatherings, amongst other types of gatherings). Many churches feel their rights are being infringed upon, and are therefore practicing a form of civil disobedience.¹

According to California’s stay-at-home order, and Governor Newsom’s schedule for reopening, which falls into four stages, religious gatherings fall into stage 3, with other large group gatherings. As of this writing, leaders of several evangelical churches announced that they will reopen for Sunday services on May 31, 2020.²

¹<https://www.tylerbursch.com/religious-petition-to-governor-gavin-newsom>

²<https://www.sbsun.com/2020/05/07/evangelical-church-leaders-vow-to-reopen-sanctuary-doors-early-in-southern-california>

While this short paper seeks to make no judgement on the actions of other churches, and their right and ability to govern themselves as they see fit, this paper does seek to lay out why Anthem Ventura is not participating, and choosing to meet online, and as restrictions begin to lift, in smaller gatherings, in accordance with guidance from the county.

When Should Churches Reject Governmental Guidelines on Gathering and Engage in Civil Disobedience?

In his excellent article for 9Marks³, Jonathan Leeman unpacks this question. This is a difficult question to wrestle with because “both the government and our churches have a legitimate biblical claim on the territory of gatherings. You might call it jurisdictional overlap.”

He goes on:

Governments possess authority, if for no other reason, then to preserve human life (see Gen. 9:5–6). They are obligated by God to do so. If temporarily banning all gatherings of a certain size accomplishes that end, they should.

At the same time, churches possess a right to gather, arguably as a property of a natural right to freely assemble, certainly as the religious right to assemble. Our vertical obligation to worship God as churches creates that horizontal right with respect to other people and our governments.

He encourages to positive submit to the government as a posture of submission to God:

If the government has a reasonable argument to ban every kind of gathering in order to protect life, then churches should act the part of dutiful citizens and obey the government. They shouldn't just “go along with the government by our own free will,” as a friend of mine put it. They should positively submit. Submitting to it is to submitting to God (Rom. 13v1–2).

Why should the government's authority come first? Because preserving life now allows for the freedom to gather later. You cannot gather as a church if you're dead. Paul therefore tells us to pray for kings, and to lead and peaceful and quiet lives so that people can be saved (1 Tim. 2v1–4). First, peace and safety. Then church work. At least typically.

Two reasons for civil disobedience

Leeman outlines two potential scenarios for which civil disobedience is warranted.

First, the government has to have a reasonable argument:

A totalitarian state which completely banishes the freedom of assembly probably doesn't have such a reasonable argument. One ground for civil disobedience, then, would be when it's overwhelmingly obvious to good sense and reason that the government has no legitimate basis for banning gatherings.

³<https://www.9marks.org/article/when-should-churches-reject-governmental-guidelines-on-gathering-and-engage-in-civil-disobedience>

To be sure, determining what's a reasonable argument or a legitimate basis requires case-by-case judgments, and Christians might disagree. Stopping a pandemic which kills more than 50,000 U.S. citizens within a month strikes me as pretty reasonable.

Second, the government cannot single out religious groups:

If it allows sporting events and concerts and political conventions to meet, then it should not forbid churches from meeting. If a government does single out churches, again, then the church may have biblical warrant to disobey.

So, what if we disagree with the government's assessments?

The very definition of submission is “deferring to another’s judgment, rather than your own.” It’s easy to submit when we agree, it’s another altogether to submit when we disagree.

But, we have to acknowledge that every human authority is relative and lesser-than – lesser than God’s authority which is absolute. So, we never surrender judgement absolutely to human authority entirely, rather, we got to God for wisdom and discernment, and rely on him in these difficult moments.

Why we will not reopen large gatherings on May 31

#1 Churches are not being singled out for religious discrimination

It appears that the government is not singling out churches, and we believe it possesses a compelling argument to ban all large gatherings in order to fulfill its basic function of preserving life. So we as a church are choosing to submit to the current limitations placed on gatherings for the foreseeable future.

If the government was telling us that we were *not allowed to preach the gospel*, or that we were *not allowed to have spiritual conversations with other believers over the phone or internet*, then that would be something to fight against.

Or, if this was somehow preventing us from ministering to our congregations or non-believers, then we would need to really consider coming against these government orders. But that’s simply not the case.

What is being challenged is our *preference*. We’d prefer to gather together in a large group. And we are choosing to lay down our *preference* for the good of others.

We believe there are deep biblical roots for why churches can and should gather in large groups, but nowhere in Scriptures is it prescribed as the only means of apprenticeship to Jesus and sanctification through his Spirit.

#2 Our Evangelistic witness

Our willingness to put our preferences for *how we gather* aside in this cultural movement shows care for the community and love for our neighbors. It shows that we care about their good, too, not just our own.

#3 The church is not the 90-minutes Sunday service

We say this a lot at Anthem: the church is not a building, and event, but a people! We believe the church to

be much more robust than a 21st century Americanized Sunday service. Christian community comes in many forms. In the book of Acts we see large gatherings, but we also see people gathering from home to home and even in pairs. We see family members ministering together even - this too is community. These small gatherings in homes was probably the primary way that people gathered in the early church.

Hebrews 10v24-25 speaks to the necessity and motivation of “gathering together” to “stir one another up to love and good works.” This is not exclusively speaking to large group gatherings, but all gatherings! Besides the focus in this passage is not on which type of gathering is happening, but that it’s actually happening and what’s happening in those gatherings. The point is for Christians to be with one another in order to encourage one another and build each other up. In our time and place, that can happen through a variety of different mediums.

#4 We don’t want to miss what God is up to

Some of the most powerful times in church history have been when normal church rhythms are disrupted.

We believe God is doing something unique this season. Those with a prophetic ear in prayer might be sensing this as well. An awakening, revival, a resurgence of the gospel - people are hungry for God and his presences and his holiness, and many for the first time, are seeking him diligently in prayer and hope!

We don’t want to get so caught up in fighting for our preference that we miss out on his presence!

Jesus is at work in his Church and this church, and we want to put our attention on what he’s doing – in the marriages being restored and healed; the newfound callings and prompting from God found in the elimination of busyness and hurry; the embrace of limitations and solitude to allow the sanctification from the Holy the Spirit; the innovation and creativity being birthed in the church anew; and the realignment to God’s heart for his people and his creation – we don’t miss out on any of that!

Anthem Ventura: would you join us in meeting Jesus in the work he’s doing in our church, in our city, in our county, state and around the world?

A pastoral note on how Christian can and should engage in politics: Christians are exiles

We are not in charge and America is not a Christian nation. Our responsibility as Christians is to live well, wisely, and holy in exile until Jesus returns or takes to our true home.

Philippians 3:20

[20] But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, (ESV)

Since we are living in a temporary home, displaced and in exile, how do we interact with the political system around us? There is bound to be a time when the government will not come into alignment with Christian value systems and beliefs, and there will be times when the government's commands or allows things are morally wrong. In many cases, Christians will have a responsibility to resist.

But, *how* we resist matters.

If we are only offensive or only attractive to the world and not both, we can be sure we are failing to live as we ought. – Tim Keller

Civil disobedience is a nuanced, thoughtful, theology-formed, with a willingness to suffer in Christlike conviction – not anger, hatred, self-righteousness. Things will happen that require Christians to resist the state, but we should do it with a spirit of humility and a willingness to suffer the consequences gracefully. Christians should have *conviction that resists*, but *humility that suffers*.

How should Christians engage in politics?⁴

#1 - With eschatological hope

Our hope is not found in this world, in this culture, or in our political system or government, but Jesus himself. We should not be too broken-hearted or too excited about the decisions our government makes because we are groaning and longing for a day when Jesus makes everything right.

#2 - With humble conviction

Demonstrative humility and deep conviction are not mutually exclusive, but rather the guiding principles for how Christians engage in this world. Grace and truth together – what should be *heard* is our convictions, what should be *felt* is our humility.

#3 - As a provocative counter-cultural community of alternative promise

Are we speaking AND demonstrating a better way of living? Or are we just as grumpy, busy, and outraged as everyone else? Christians adhere to a different worldview altogether, and it's one that points to Jesus as King, Lord, and Savior.

A few guiding principles for Christian political participation:

#1 - A vision of love

The state can legislate and penalize, but only Jesus can make a person want to be different

#2 - Non-abrasive & gracious conversation

Are we known for our loudest extremes or our grace? Nothing good has ever come from criticizing something on social media

#3 - Cultural sophistication about the complexity and nuance around issues

We are informed about the major problems facing societies, personally impacted by the needs of others and seeking opportunities to serve as agents of godly change. We are courageous and empowered to seek God-honoring solutions.

#4 - Theological conservative

Biblical literacy, engaging w/ people far from God doesn't mean we sacrifice truth. We are formed first by

⁴ Adapted from Jon Tyson's sermon: Jesus and politics
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1En37ldKvIU&feature=emb_logo

God and his word in prayer, worship and the study of Scripture.

#5 - In search of common ground where possible

Principled pluralism: it's not a christian culture, so learn to work with others who are aligned with causes you respect. Because we live in a post-christian puristic society, where can we work together, serve the city

#6 - Personal integrity

Don't be a hypocrite. Take out the log in your own eye before addressing the speck in someone else's.

#7 - Prayer, fasting and intercession

The bible says pray for your leaders. Do it. And don't underestimate the power of prayer.

#8 - A sober-minded view of our polarizing two-party system

We have to understand that no one party will perfectly represent Jesus' vision for life.

This emphasis on package deals puts pressure on Christians in politics. For example, following both the Bible and the early church, Christians should be committed to racial justice and the poor, but also to the understanding that sex is only for marriage and for nurturing family. One of those views seems liberal and the other looks oppressively conservative. The historical Christian positions on social issues do not fit into contemporary political alignments. – Tim Keller

Our allegiance is not to a party, political system, or even a nation, but to Jesus Christ.

The overarching principle:

Jesus is Lord – The claim of Christians under any kind political framework since his death and resurrection.

Christians should be involved politically as a way of loving our neighbors, whether they believe as we do or not. To work for better public schools or for a justice system not weighted against the poor or to end racial segregation requires political engagement. Christians have done these things in the past and should continue to do so...The Gospel gives us the resources to love people who reject both our beliefs and us personally. Christians should think of how God rescued them. He did it not by taking power but by coming to earth, losing glory and power, serving and dying on a cross. How did Jesus save? Not with a sword but with nails in his hands.⁵

Conclusion

We are actively seeking the Spirit, and resting on the wisdom and discernment he's providing for our elder team to lead, care, guide, and plan for our future. We are excited for what the church will look like at the end of all this – not in spite of this season, but because of it. We trust that "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." (Phil 1v6).

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/29/opinion/sunday/christians-politics-belief.html>